February 20th, 2008

California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice
900 Lafayette Street, Suite 608
Santa Clara, California 95050

Dear Commissioners,

As people of faith, we reject the state sanctioned killing of another human being as a response to murder. Together we are united in our conviction that the death penalty is not serving our communities or the victims of crime.

Some people claim that victims’ families need the death penalty “to help bring them closure.” As clergy we are often the first responders to personal tragedies. Many community members will come to us for emotional and spiritual support in times of crisis. Many of us walk with grieving mothers who have seen their child’s future stolen from them by murder. We know much about coping with mourners’ grief, and we know that simple formulas for closure are an illusion.

In our pastoral counseling experiences with grieving mothers, vengeance is not the primary concern expressed by them. Victim family members look for consolation, and they do not find comfort in the prospect of eventually bringing grief to one more mother in the San Quentin viewing room. They want to see society’s resources invested in their local communities so other at risk youth can pursue positive paths. Out of their tragedy, these grieving mothers seek meaning and hope. They do not want more violence and despair for another family.

As faith community leaders, we urge you to cease spending precious public safety and community resources on the death penalty. We need to focus our resources and efforts on preventing crimes, serving victims, and solving crimes. In Los Angeles County, fifty percent of our African American and Latino youth will not graduate from high school. We have ninety thousand youth (16-25) who are not in school or gainfully employed. Many other California counties face similar challenges. Instead of diverting precious community resources into cost-prohibitive death penalty litigations, let us invest our resources in our children’s education, recreation and vocational programs.

The undersigned clergy urge that the Commission recommend to the Legislature a focus on realistic justice that will help prevent more mothers from having to bear the tragedy and grief of burying their own children.
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